

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL**

**ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LOWELL, MA:
MAKING, REMAKING, AND REMAKING AGAIN**

INFORMANT: MURIEL PARSEGHIAN [ARMENIA]

INTERVIEWER: CHRISTOPH STROBEL

DATE: DECEMBER 12, 2007

M = MURIEL

C = CHRISTOPH

Tape 07.06

M: My name is Muriel Parseghian and I live on Woodland Drive in Lowell.

C: First off, I'd like to talk about the migration history of your family... (M: My particular family?) Yeah... why did they decide to come to the United States, where did you guys come from, etc.?

M: Sure. We came in 1963 from France, but in order for me to tell you how we ended up in Lowell in '63 I have to go back almost 70 years. At the turn of the century, my extended family, at the time obviously my parents were not married, they were living in what was called Anatolia in those days. Asia Minor and Anatolia. This was before World War I. Under the Ottoman Empire, Armenian families, there was what was called the "Milliett System." So, each ethnic group was under the jurisdiction of their own... for the Armenians it was the patriarchy, the religious patriarchy. At the turn of the century, when the progroms began against the Armenians and eventually culminated with the 1915 genocide, both sides of my family started to migrate out of their ancestral homes. My parents come from two different areas of what we call western Armenia, or eastern Turkey. They come from two different parts. So, my father's family, my father was born during the genocide. He was born in 1917. They took a different route than my mother's family. My father's family went from the town of Kutahya, which still exists today, and moved to, migrated to Istanbul. There's a, I forgot the name of the other city next to Istanbul, there's one on the Asian side and one on the European side. From there they took a boat as refugees to Greece, to Piraeus, Greece and they stayed there for quite a few years. He lost three of his siblings there and my uncle was born there. Then from there they went, as refugees again by boat, to Marseille. My mother's family, my mother was a

post-genocide baby. My mother's family went the southern route into Syria through the Del Zor desert to the town of Aleppo, the second-largest city in Syria. There, in refugee camps, my grandparents met each other. Again, my grandfather had left...again, my mother was not born but she was conceived in those refugee camps and then they came by boat to Marseille as refugees and they were in another refugee camp. So, my father was brought up in one refugee camp, my mother in another. My father became a citizen by joining the French army, became a citizen and came back after World War II. Met my mother and married her so we were in France for the first few years of my life. While my mother was living in France, her great-uncle had migrated to United States and little by little he migrated to Binghamton, New York where there was a substantial Armenian community. There were factories there, Johnson and Murphy, I think was shoes. Anyways, so little by little he brought us. First of all, my uncle, my mother's brother. Then he brought my cousins, then my aunt. So when it came time for us to come, he signed the paperwork and we were going to go to Binghamton, but one of my cousins met an Armenian woman from Lowell. So, they were moving to Lowell so we came to Lowell.

C: So the grandfather was really the pull factor, because France, as far as I know, has a pretty sizeable Armenian community.

M: Yes. Marseille had, at the time we left, had in a city of 600,000 there were 80,000 Armenians. Yes, we had in every neighborhood... because most of the people who came to United States, even those who did not stay, came to Marseille. The French government at the end of the Ottoman Empire, at the end of World War I, was still involved with Syria and Lebanon, and that's where a lot of Armenians were so they brought them to Marseille. So that's how we ended up in Lowell. We could've ended up any place. The reason my cousin married a girl from Lowell was because there was a substantial Armenian community in Lowell. So he met somebody who was here

C: This was originally specially placed around the area where the refugee center

M: Yes.

C: Was that still a strong Armenian community here at that time?

M: Yes, when we came it was. There was a lot of Armenians living in the city itself. There was the Armenian church on Lawrence St. Which now I believe is a Spanish Pentecostal but don't hold me to it. On Lawrence St. there was a church, we had no other center, no community center. The Armenian church is a lot like other churches because there's a split, a political split. So, the community that did not go to that church on Lawrence St., which we did not go to it, we were not members although we attended but we were not members. Had no place to gather so in '64 we bought the building on Liberty St. and that became our community center. I think the Lawrence St. church moved to Chelmsford, I want to say in the '70s they bought that piece of property (And they're still active?). They're still there, yes. And most Armenians in greater Lowell go either to the church in Chelmsford or to the church in North Andover.

C: What were your expectations when you came from France to America, did you have certain preconceptions?

M: As a child, it was Hollywood. So, whatever I saw in the movies, and we were big movie fans 'cause you know in France, I thought we were going to come and see that here. That really was the expectation. As a child, I could hear people talking and say, "Dollars grow on trees there." As a child you think that's true so, 'is there really dollars on trees?' That was the expectation, what Hollywood is we would see and hear.

C: How did you come over?

M: By boat. We took the train from Marseille to Paris and we stayed there for a couple of days. Then we took a train from Paris to The Hague, then we took the boat. We stopped in London but didn't get off and we ended up in New York City. The name of the boat was the USS United States. And then from New York my cousin, the one who was getting married to the girl, came to pick us up. Funny thing we remember distinctly because he came with his future father-in-law who had a Cadillac. In those days a Cadillac had wings, so when we saw them we said, "oh, we came to America."

C: Did your family have an expectation of staying in Lowell for a limited amount of time or was it?

M: We did not have any expectations to go anywhere else. We just wanted to be reunited with, my mother wanted to be reunited with her family. Actually, the only expectation was that we knew my parents were going to be able to get jobs, steady jobs, and economically we were going to go. That was understood. Obviously, if we had a nice lifestyle in France it would have been difficult to leave but economically we did not, so this was the expectation.

C: Have you become a citizen?

M: Yeah, we became citizens really quick, 5 years into it, the moment we could we became citizens.

C: Did your folks also bring in relatives to the Lowell area?

M: No. By the time we came, the few relatives... I'm sorry, I take that back. My grandma, paternal grandmother did come. She came as a tourist and at the time Bradford Morse was our congressperson and at Lowell city hall there was a man named Michael Ansara, he was in charge of immigrants. When it came time for my grandmother to leave, Ansara asked us, "do you want her to stay?" Of course, so he places a call to Bradford Morse and at the time our congress passed a law, we didn't know these things, that she could stay forever. She stayed and she died here. We did bring her, but no one else. My other relatives, even my first cousin who has his siblings here and his mother was here, got married and after that no. Nobody came after us, actually, besides my grandmother.

C: One part of the project is also to assess the role of neighborhoods for immigrants. So, I want to shift from coming here to your life in Lowell and living in Lowell. Maybe also, because you mentioned it in the interview introduction, how the Armenian community here has changed and is maybe even disappearing. At least this is somewhat of a feeling I had when I came to visit you guys, and you were very hospitable to us, it was a theme that a lot of people brought up, it was really on the mind of a lot of people. So, you've lived in Lowell, basically, since the 1960s.

M: Since '63. I went away to college, I went to school in Lebanon. I left Lowell for a total of maybe 10 years on and off.

C: Let me ask you first, do you consider yourself as being a part of, of living in and being part of a neighborhood today?

M: A physical neighborhood? Not from the Armenian sense, no.

C: Did you have that feeling in the 1960s?

M: Well, I saw Lowell as a neighborhood. There was a very, very active Armenian community, so there was the support that a community provides and there was a social aspects of it. That part... physically, we did have where we lived on Fort Hill Avenue, we had four Armenian neighbors on that one block, us and four other families. I did not consider this to be an Armenian section, we had Armenian neighbors, but I did consider Lowell to be an Armenian city at the time.

C: Were there more Armenian businesses at the time comparing, for example, how you do your shopping compared with the 1960s and today, did you feel there was much more of an Armenian neighborhood, was there an Armenian store you could go to, Armenian businesses, Armenian lawyers, etc.?

M: Right, there were... for example, there was an Armenian tailor. So you would go to him. There were the Armenian hairdressers. Everybody's related too, by marriage, or by acquaintance, so you felt as if you knew these people. Obviously, there is some Armenian still, merchants and commerce people, but I don't seek them out. I mean, I don't need to seek them out the way my family needed to.

C: Can you elaborate on that, I know what you're getting at, but for someone who might not be

M: Yeah, it was my parents... it was easier to do... When my father went to get his drivers license... he saw that there were, that at the time the registry was running the, there was registry cops. He saw that there were two Armenians on the list, so he sort of sought the Armenian guy, not that the guy was going to give him a break, but he was certainly going to feel like, this guy is going to understand me, he is not going to have a difficult time understanding my language or what I'm saying. So the same thing, then....

You go to an Armenian barber, or go to the Armenian locksmith, whoever had an Armenian business you would solicit. Not so much to support them economically, I think, but it just gave my parents a level of confidence. They walked in it was easy to do business with them, there was no trying to explain things. Or even when you go to Espresso's Pizza, there was a group of people working there, there was one Armenian guy working there so my father would always go to him to order the pizza...I don't have that need anymore. I'm very comfortable going into any store. That's the difference.

C: Do you think with your parents that was sort of the need for community as well? It's language which seems to have been one factor, not necessarily that they weren't proficient in English, but it's sort of gave them a safety net, but also sort of a need for community as well?

M: There was...they had a community socially, obviously, because all Armenians, we all know each other. We get together, as you well know, for different events. I don't know so much if they went there because they felt the need to re-establish what they had in France, of living in an Armenian ghetto. I really think for my parents, anyways, it was the fact that it was very easy, the guy knew Armenian words or he understood and if they asked for something unusual, the guy understood. I think it was more a level of comfort. Being an immigrant, you just felt comfortable talking to somebody, the person was probably not an immigrant, but they were of Armenian descent.

C: That makes perfect sense. I think you still see that playing out in the newer communities as well. You say you don't have that need...is your social circle...obviously the Armenian center plays an important role. But do you have non-Armenian friends?

M: Right, right. Like most immigrants I think we straddle two worlds. You have my Armenian world and then I have my non-Armenian world. There are some friends that go, just because they are able to function in both circles, they will come...I will have my Armenian friends meet my non-Armenian friends. For the greater majority, the two of them are almost parallel. I know a lot of people like this.

C: No, it makes perfect sense. Being an immigrant myself, I mean it sounds very familiar. In that sense, did you...I'd like to flesh out a little more the comparison between your life in Marseille and your life in Lowell. You refer to it as the "Armenian ghetto," and I'm just repeating.

M: It was an Armenian ghetto. After the Armenians were in the refugee camps, it was literally camps, towards the end of the '30s, before World War II broke out, certainly, and up to 1960 there was a migration from the camps into neighborhoods. Basically, what people did was go from shacks, sort of, to homes. So, I lived in an Armenian ghetto. The only non-Armenians I came across was my teacher, the doctor, the mailman and the garbage collector. At school, the school I went to was about 40 percent Armenian and none of my classmates who I was friends with, they were all Armenian. So, we lived in a totally Armenian world. When we came here, like I said, we had neighbors on the block who were Armenian but we were...There were no children so the immediate friends I had

on the block were non-Armenian. So that was really my first exposure to non-Armenian people. The biggest thing was, oh this is how people eat, they eat differently than us. All these things that you get exposed to that you were never exposed to before.

C: Can I switch? In terms of language, in France you spoke Armenian a lot?

M: Right, everybody spoke Armenian because the elderly, my grandparents generation, never learned to speak French, never. Some of them spoke Turkish. My grandparents were Turkish speaking...Everybody spoke Armenian.

C: Does that have to do also with the genocide? I know a little bit of the history.

M: Depending upon where you were in what's now called Turkey, depending on what cities or what regions, you spoke Turkish or you spoke a dialect of Armenian. There were very few people who spoke proper Armenian.

C: Was there also force used by the government, because I know there is some debate about the Kurds about being forced to speak, is this similar?

M: The only place they did not speak Turkish was in the church. The church was in Armenian, the whole mass. But it's an ancient Armenian, so it's not the street Armenian. One thing about the Turkish language the Armenians spoke that was very, very slang. So, that Turkish language only really spoken among Armenians and it's a dying language. If you traveled in the 40s, 50s, 60s and heard the generation of the survivors of the genocide, they spoke that Turkish language, but if you...they cannot speak with the Turks, they cannot speak with the Turkish people in Istanbul or Ankara, it's a different, it's different. They spoke this Turkish language that some people call Anatolian Turkish. It's nineteenth century Turkish, almost.

C: When you came to Lowell, did you speak Armenian with your family?

M: We spoke Armenian and French because my sisters and I had obviously gone to school so we were comfortable speaking French amongst each other, but you know, with my aunt and with my cousins and certainly with the Armenian community we spoke Armenian.

C: Do you have a sense that these languages are still passed on to the next generation, or is this something that is sort of fading away?

M: It's passed on through...in a limited way. What happened with the Armenian community, in the 70s we got a new wave of immigrants from the Middle East, most of them Lebanon, not so much from Syria, from Lebanon and of course from Iran. Their languages, the Iranian Armenians speak the eastern dialect, which is the same dialect which is spoken in Armenia today. We speak the western dialect, so the Syrians, the Lebanese when they came into the United States, and quite a few moved into greater Lowell, quite a few moved into Lowell. There was a resurgence of the language being

spoken. That is dying out now. Very few people force their children to speak Armenian. Before, you were forced. Your parents wouldn't talk to you unless you answered back in Armenian. There are some Armenian schools, there are two Armenian schools in greater Boston, but it's dying, yes it's dying. Here it's dying, there are pockets in the United States where it is not, but it's dying, yeah.

C: I'd like to shift to the issue of family now. One of the scholarly stereotypes about the Middle East and the people in that region is the strength of the family ties. Do you feel that in the Armenian?

M: Yes, that's true. Yes, yes. It's like, yes, your family's extremely important. It's like, almost not that they're important but they're in your life, you know. It's not unusual for an Aunt to give the nephew advice that the nephew does not even seek. You know, 'you should do this, you should do that,' that's it. It's changing obviously under other influences, but yes Armenians are very, very family-oriented.

C: How do families stay together? I mean, obviously there used to be more of a community around, do you feel that becomes a challenge for families?

M: Yes, it does. What happened is that people left because of jobs, or they left because they married another Armenian. What has happened to our community, I don't know if you picked it up when you came, is that those who stayed here married non-Armenians. They sort of strengthened the community. The Armenians who married Armenians went to large Armenian communities. So, we have here in Lowell, we have those who are active in our community for the most part are married to non-Armenians.

C: And so they moved to places like Watertown?

M: Watertown, or even California. A lot of people from Lowell moved to California

C: Oh, ok. Is that a fairly 1980s development or is it more recent?

M: The ones who came from the Middle East and who came to Lowell only stayed here for 5, 6, 7, 8 years or whatever and eventually moved to California because they had relatives there or because California resembles much more the Middle East lifestyle. And then, in the '90s, in the '80s as people, my contemporaries younger than me, started thinking about getting married there was...if you met somebody, you'd say, 'ah, he lives,' although we're not going to date it was accepted that you would work on the relationship and move. Because there is really nothing, the economy, the situation here is not that appealing most people went to where there spouses are.

C: This is particularly important in the larger Los Angeles area right?

M: Yes

C: That's very interesting. Do you feel like your life is different from that of your parents? Or how is your life changed from that of your parents? Obviously, you already said that you don't need that kind of safety net. So that's obviously one point.

M: One thing I can say is that what my parents came here for, the economic opportunity really, yes I've achieved that. They may not have achieved it in their lifetime because they came here late or whatever but certainly they gave me, my sisters and myself the opportunity to do that, and that has made a big difference. I can say that for all Armenians that came. Within one generation people had bought property, they were in business, they were educated. That's the American dream and for the most part Armenians achieved it. Those who did not, did not achieve it because the opportunity was not there, because of their own weaknesses. I can say Armenians achieved the American dream, that's for sure.

C: So you obviously consider yourself an American at this point or an Armenian-American?

M: I'm going to tell you this and you can probably understand. When I'm in this country, I'm an Armenian-American. But when I travel outside America, there is no... I'm the most American when I'm with other Armenians from all over the world. As you know, I belong to a few organizations and when we have international meetings. Armenians come from all over the world, that's when I really feel that I'm an American.

C: Is there an effort, you say that some people made the choice to move to larger Armenian communities to pass on the cultural heritage and language to the children. Within Lowell do you feel that there is an effort to teach the history, obviously the genocide is a very central...

M: Armenians are a very politicized people so there is that effort to pass it on to the next generation. It's like a duty you feel, it's in our psyche, you have to do that. Even the Armenian that's only one-fourth Armenian feels compelled to do that. Yes there is, there's a... who you are, you take great pride in who you are, so you have to pass it on to your children.

C: I want to make another giant leap over to the issue of economics. You already mentioned that your economic situation as compared to your parents has really improved. I don't know whether that's part of the generational sacrifice that your parents made. I know that in a lot of immigrant communities folks still support a family network back home, was that the case with your family France?

M: I can tell you this though, in America you had things that you didn't have in other parts of the world. You have gadgets, you have toys. Even to this day we send things back to France, not because they cannot afford it but because the abundance of it here, the quality, it's relatively cheap and whatever. Yes, but it's not that we're supporting them, but we give them luxury items that otherwise they would not get. I know when we were in France and something would come from America, it was a big deal, you know a really

big deal...Everybody wants something from America, like my 14 year-old cousin wanted a Denver Broncos shirt...They love American things. I remember living in France, we loved American things. There's something about American products, they're just appealing. The same thing when people go to Armenia, they just bring a lot a lot of stuff with them. There's just something appealing about it once we're here.

C: I know I remember but maybe I'm confusing this now with someone else I talked to during the night, but your family is really from what is now eastern Turkey, right, do I remember that correctly?

M: My family, no, my family is from more central Turkey. They migrated from more the eastern part of Turkey, maybe 5-10 centuries. I don't know when they moved.

C: The reason why I'm asking this question is sort of 'cause I remember that you said at some point that when you go to what is Armenia today, it doesn't feel like home to you.

M: Correct, it's not. That was a very small portion of...it was a different culture that was influenced by the Russian and Iran while we were influenced by the Greeks, and the Turks, obviously the Turks, and all the different Mongolian invasions and whatever. So yeah, it's different. Even our grammar is different because of the influences of other cultures.

C: Do you still feel there's a tie with the state of Armenia? (Yes, yes, yes.) Is there an effort with you or people you know within the Armenian community to support the Armenian state?

M: Yes, one thing people do, we support charities there, orphanages, hospitals. Send money to your relatives. Of course, travel there to get the economy going. It's almost understood that you have to make at least one pilgrimage there. People ask me, they don't say, 'did you go to Armenia?' they go 'when did you go to Armenia?' It's become part of American-Armenian culture that even some people go every year. I don't know if you remember them. There's people that buy houses there, they go there and instead of buying a house in Florida they buy it there. Yeah, there is a very strong attachment to go there and there's this "Birthright Armenia" which we borrowed from the Jews, it's the same concept. You have to go there. How long it's going to last, I don't know, I don't know how long it's going to last. People will go because it's a beautiful country and visit historic things, I don't know how long the emotional and economic support will last, 'cause people, frankly, being an old Soviet Union country, it still has a lot of that corruption and that national character that is unpleasant to the rest of Armenians. So, there is some frustrations in that aspect.

C: How would you describe your background in the city now, do you feel like your life is economically comfortable here, do you feel like you're solidly middle-class, your employment is good, etc.?

M: I would feel like I'm middle-class, I've got a good job. I had the opportunity to go to school. I would say I'm middle-class, I own my house. Well, the bank owns it, but you know. Like I said, I think I've reached the goals of my parents, they thought would happen by moving here. Become much more assimilated. I lived in France and I lived in Lebanon and huge Armenian communities in both places and you never felt you were part of France or Lebanon. Lebanon's a little bit more complicated but you were never... you were an Armenian in Lebanon. In France, you were an Armenian too. It has changed now, because a lot of Armenians have given up being Armenian, they've become French. Here, I feel as if I can be Armenian and there's no issue, I'm fine.

C: So, in Lebanon, were you staying there in a refugee camp?

M: No, I went to school there in '83-4. It was an Armenian school. There was going to be peace then. There was, then no longer. There was a huge, huge Armenian community in Lebanon, huge. (So they sort of went out with a civil war?) Between...they started going out in the '50s. People don't know that in the '50s there was also civil in Lebanon, so they started leaving in the '50s. They moved everywhere. They moved a lot to United States, some to France. Some moved to Dubai, Kuwait, you know. Other places Saudi Arabia to make money. But most people came to Los Angeles.

C: Social networks and religion is another theme we're interested in, the kind of religious services you attend, the center and your involvement there, etc.

M: The Armenian church is a national church so it's not only a Christian church. We pride ourselves on being the first nation to adopt Christianity. It's a national church now we have Catholics and Protestants and we have others. It was run...the church really ran the nation. I mentioned that there was a political split. So that created some issues, particularly in this country, but the church is very important. Not so much for religious reasons, but because it's your national church and it's your community. So, in my grandparent's generation they would go to church a lot because they didn't have that. My parent's generation, little by little, got away from it. What has happened to the Armenian church is that when people have children, young children, they'll come to the church till the children are 14 or 15 and don't want to go anymore. So then they stop coming, regularly they stop coming. They'll come on the holidays, they'll usually come at Easter because of 40 days of Lent is a big, big thing in our church. They come to Armenian Christmas somewhat. Then they'll come back when they're older. So, if you go to our church you see there are parents with young children and elderly people. Those whose children are in college are not around. They used to be around but they're not around. The churches in America are struggling a little bit because people move out and they don't want to drive. Wherever Armenians go they build a new church, they build a new church. So, I go...actually, the number one reason I go for is funerals and for memorial services. That is my particular thing. There are other Armenians who go for different things. Memorial services we do, forty days up to a year, yearly, these kind of things. I'll go a few other times but I'm not...part of that community, when I go...most of the people that attend do it for social reasons, social and community. They don't even understand what's being said because it's all in Armenian and it's ancient Armenian. It's

like speaking middle English, they don't understand anything. People do get married and christened, that's probably how the churches survive. Funerals, marriages and christening they use the church; a social network, do you want me to touch upon that?

C: Yes, if you want.

M: There are organizations. So, growing up I belonged to one of these organizations. It was called the Armenian Youth Federation and we had a chapter in Lowell. We met at that facility. That was my social network, you know, we would meet on the weekends and then we would go out. It started when I was 10 and till about 30 that's what you do. And of course you go away, you go to other communities where there's Armenians so you go together. They'd become your social network for that. Then you become...to this day those people are still my friends. That's how we basically stick together, through these organizations because otherwise you don't see each other. Everybody just has too much of a busy lifestyle to see each other, but these things force you. Like that dinner you came to, it forces everybody to come together and so if you do 4 or 5 times a year, it keeps the community, yeah.

C: Excellent. So, you obviously enjoy these kind of celebration. What's your seasonal cycle, do you enjoy the Lent and stuff, or the Armenian Christmas?

M: Right now, my life has changed but I probably like, I like everything from Armenian Christmas to the Lent celebration. I like that because it's short. So, a lot of the time we see each other a lot. Even the planning takes, you know, you get together to plan it and then you get to see people who you usually don't see besides the normal people, the average people who come in. Then, in the summers we have, course we participate in the folk festival, that really helps our community a lot, just getting together really helps a lot and leading up to that, that one month. I mean, if we didn't have that we wouldn't have many things to do.

C: What's the Armenian community's involvement with the folk festival?

M: We have booth, we have a food booth. We've been there...Actually we used to be part of the regatta festival. We've been with their organization since it started. We used to even belong to the International Institute. They used to have events. We've always been part of some kind of event here. When there used to be a JFK Plaza Memorial Day Weekend, before the Folk Festival came to Lowell, the national folk festival, and then when Lowell decided that we're going to do our own. So, we've been there forever, we were at JFK Plaza next to the beer booth. Last year we took a break 'cause we just a little bit overwhelmed but this year we came back.

C: Obviously, you're saying that a lot of members of the Armenian community have either moved away or moved to the suburbs, but do you believe that the Armenians... Lowell used to be an Armenian town, do you still feel that way? As an ethnic group are they involved in Lowell politics?

M: The funny thing is that Alan Kazanjian [ed note: recently elected Lowell city councilor] is Armenian. No, I mean, there's Armenians involved in a lot of different things, aspects in Lowell, whether it's government, it's just a lot. It's not... it feels as if their involvement has little to do with them being Armenian. I mean, nobody brings the Armenian banner to these things. Although there are Armenians in Lowell, they're not, we're not... I mean, there's Armenians that work for the newspaper. No, I don't feel that, I don't feel as if in Lowell, the presence of Armenians in Lowell reflects the presence of a strong Armenian community.

C: But do you make political decisions or do you support people because they're Armenian or have you moved beyond that?

M: Me personally? No, actually, I've moved beyond that, yes.

C: But do you think there are people still within the Armenian community...

M: Yes, of course, the older people. I'm 55 but people older than me, every time they see the 'ian' it doesn't matter, the person could be a murderer. That's true you know. Yes, there are people who will support, who only want to go to Armenian dentists, you know, whatever. Yes, there are some people like that.

C: Do you find that some people call Lowell an ethnic city and that certain ethnic groups hold a disproportionate amount of power, do you agree with that assessment?

M: Of course, yes yes. The only way Armenians got into politics was by not having the Armenian banner any more. I don't think Alan Kazanjian's father, for sure not his grandfather, I don't think his father could have run. People, I think they see him as Armenian, but they don't see him as a foreigner. I think his father and grandfather would've been looked upon differently. Yes, I think there is certain... I've been in Lowell since '63 and it's the same power base. I think it's very difficult for newcomers to be integrated.

C: Would you like to see more of the recent immigrants being involved?

M: Of course, but... The oligarchy, you know, has not allowed anybody else to come in. It's funny, they talk about Irish-Americans and French-Canadians and Greeks, but that's it.

C: Have you personally experienced tensions between different ethnic groups in Lowell in your lifetime. Growing up, did you feel sometimes that you were discriminated against as an Armenian?

M: I'll tell you, because I'm a little brown-skinned and people don't know what I am, 'cause growing up the kids didn't know. They made assumptions that I was Hispanic and they would say nasty things, there was that part. Nobody knew what Armenian was, "what are you, what are you?" Because I spoke with an accent and my skin was a little

browner I was mistook. That kind of discrimination.... I was made to feel at times like the outsider.

C: Now, do you feel like you're type-cast as a Middle-easterner or is that not an issue?

M: Well, good point. When all these issues began with 9/11, then again that became, you know. People would say, "Are you Palestinian? No." That kind of thing. "Aren't you from Pakistan? No, I'm Armenian." Then you have to give them a history and geography lesson. Up to the '60s and '70s, even some of the '80s, I'll give you a perfect example. During the Iranian crisis my social circle of Armenian friends, those who would go out, there used to be a Howard Johnson, which became a Ground Round and it was open almost 24 hours. So we would always go at 11:30 or midnight, to get something to eat. Once, we walk in as a bunch and somebody yells out, "Don't feed those f***ing Iranians." You know...that kind of thing. And then my cousin was playing soccer, very dark skin, then somebody kicked him or something so somebody yells out, "Don't worry, he's only Iranian." That kind of thing.

C: Now that we've sort of talked about the outside threats and tensions, do you feel there's also sort of tensions within the Armenian community. That either through regional differences...or do you feel that people seem to be, I don't want to call it unified, but are beyond the usual squabbles that occur in organizations?

M: I think what has happened, because most Armenians are doing quite well economically. So, there's been this...everybody seems to be more comfortable with where they are personally, but now that people...The problem is that everybody wants their own fiefdom. There's a struggle within the Armenian community for different groups to achieve the same thing and I don't know if that's going to be resolved because just lack of understanding, or different personalities. There will be five, ten groups trying to build the same thing. I'm just giving you an example, trying to build the same hospital, that kind of thing. That's the problem with the Armenian community. Then, of course, politically how you feel about what is going on in Armenia and how much of a commitment you want to have to genocide recognition vis-a-vis the US government. Some people say, "Oh, don't offend the Congress." Others say, "Hell with Congress." That's what today's reality is.

C: That's currently a pretty big issue, especially with the genocide issue. You obviously went to high school in Lowell. Did you go to the public school?

M: Yes, yes I went to Lowell public schools. I graduated in '71.

C: And you went off to college?

M: To Northeastern, right.

C: Did you find that there were good educational opportunities in Lowell when you were going to school?

M: I can say I was very fortunate when we came we didn't speak English. We started school at the Morey and then my aunt bought a house and we moved to Fort Hill Avenue and we switched schools to Oakland, which is now the LeBlanc School. The teacher I had, I'll never forget his name, his name was Robert Timmons. He was a guy, fifth grade and he couldn't have been kinder. There was a woman that would come in once a week to do remedial reading for the kids who couldn't read, I didn't even know what that was. So she would teach me English. Then sixth grade I had Mr. Quirbach, I never knew his first name. He would push me, push me, push me and maybe within the third month of the sixth grade I had read, I had caught up with them. I think having those two guys was helpful. I don't know, I was the only one in the class like that. Then after that, at the Moody again I was very fortunate to have great teachers. Mr. Sullivan the principal always pushed me. Then Lowell High was a madhouse. There were so many issues...half of my teachers were fine, the other half, it was just a disaster there in that sense. I found that early on I had that help, the people just made me feel comfortable and the teachers I had, pushed you, "you can do it, you can do it." By the time I got to Lowell high there were quite a few immigrants there from different countries, no large immigrant group. There was a kid from Jordan, there were Czechoslovakians, it's funny, there was a kid from Egypt. All the foreigners, I knew who they were, I don't know why. There was not a large group coming in, but there were immigrants.

C: Did you find that it gave you a support network?

M: I had my friends I had originally met at the Oakland school, from Oakland we went to Moody together, so I had a small circle. There were a lot of Armenians there and instantly we became friends.

C: And that's important. I'd like to switch over to healthcare, and this is maybe more applicable to more recent immigrants...

M: It's a good question, because when I think about it, we didn't have a doctor. We did not have a family doctor. I don't know why. We just...I can't remember.

C: What did your family do when you got sick?

M: My father, I guess you went to the hospital, yeah. Or hoped you did not get sick. We did not have, healthcare was not on the radar screen. My father had a heart attack when he was 70, in 1970 I'm sorry, when he was 53. He had his doctor because he had a number of heart attacks. But the rest of us...

C: Did you...were there any Armenian traditions, sort of your home medicine?

M: That was for sure, especially when my grandparents were alive and lived with us. That was for sure. I mean, I remember they put cups, do you know this thing? If your back hurts there's these cups they'll put cotton on a fork and dip it in alcohol and burn the cotton. Then, put the cotton in the cup and put the cup, like a suction cup, [on your back].

So, your whole back would be full of that and then they'll pop it. I mean, there were all kinds of things. I mean, there were all kinds of things. I remember meat being put on, all kinds of stuff (On bruised wounds?) Yeah, and everything you had, you had to have mint tea. I don't know if it works. Psychologically, my sisters and I still do it, 'I don't feel good, I'll have a cup of mint tea.' You know, the mint that we grow ourselves and dry. Yeah, a lot of that, a lot of that.

C: Do you still grow your own mint and make the tea?

M: I'm lucky, my next-door neighbor has on her, we're not supposed to have it in the condo, but she has it so I get hers. There are a lot of Armenians who grow their own tea. That grows very easy, so a lot of people grow it and dry it, stuff like that.

C: So this is something that you continue?

M: That tea portion, yeah, we still all do it. I don't think you can go into any Armenian household that doesn't have dried mint leaves.

C: I know they do that in other countries too, I think, so even if it's just a matter of hydrating and giving a person something with water. There's probably more than just comfort to it, but who knows. That's really interesting. So now with your work you have health insurance?

M: Yeah, yes. I mean, I pay a certain portion of it, but I've got it.

C: Part of the purpose of this study is also to sort of figure out ways to connect immigrants communities, and the immigrant communities that have been neglected in the history of the town and more recent immigrants, to the park. So, I would like to ask you a couple of questions about the Lowell National Historic Park. Have you ever gone there?

M: Yeah, actually, about 2 years ago. Mehmed [Ali] helped us, coordinated with us to do a month-long presentation on the Armenians of Lowell. So, we had lectures, we had panel discussions, we had pictures, that kind of thing. It's funny. We obviously participated in the Folk Festival. So we attend the meetings leading up to it and the post meetings. You see some ethnic groups there, but I can say anecdotally that the new immigrants, they're not really active in those groups. It's the Greeks, the Armenians, the Syrians, we're the ones who talk to folks.

C: Obviously Lowell has changed a lot since you came here. Do you have any dreams for the future for your life, for the Armenian Community, for your homeland, for your family, for yourself? Where would you like to see the story head?

M: You know, for the longest time Armenian was not independent, so we always talked one day we'll have an independent, united, free Armenia and we'll all go back, we'll all go back. Well, they back independent, they became free in '93 and nobody went back. We go, we visit, because like I said I think earlier, I've become American, you know,

whatever that is. In Lowell, I really feel now that I'm a part of the community. Maybe it's because of my character, but it took a lot of time, but I feel that I'm part of the community. When I was in school I did not feel like that, I felt like a stranger. I didn't want to bring people to my house because we had different customs and they would not understand why my parents do things this way, that my parents don't speak English. Maybe because I'm mature, I'm an older person now, but I feel I'm part of Lowell. Having said that, it doesn't mean that I'm part of the power base, not me personally, it's not that. I do feel I'm part of Lowell. My dreams for the Armenian community in Lowell is really to be able to sustain ourselves a little bit longer and, at least, to be able to have those who are a half or a quarter Armenian still carry on whatever traditions.... I think it will happen. I really believe most human beings want to belong to a community. Armenians offer that. So, if your parent is a quarter Scottish or a quarter Irish, there's no community left, there's nothing, but for Armenians there is a structure, there's an instant community. That makes people, as human beings, feel much more fulfilled. As for my dreams for the homeland, I'd like it to be more politically stable, more progressive. Like I said earlier, it's corrupt...I'd like to see the other lands that belong to Armenia eventually united with Armenia. Of course, I'd like to see the genocide recognized and Turkey accept it and give some reparations. That's what I would like.

C: If there's one thing, and this is sort of like the perfect universe kind of question, but they're interesting. If there's one thing you could change about your experiences as an immigrant in Lowell, what would it be?

M: I would have forced my parents to speak English immediately. They would have had a better life, not that, they had a great life, but they would have had a much better life if they spoke English. Read and write in English and become a little bit more assimilated. They had non-Armenian friends, but it was limited. I think, especially later on in life when they got old and sick, they would have had a better quality life. The fact that they did not speak English well, they did not write it, they did not read it...I would have liked to have seen them do that...To this day I don't understand why they didn't do it. I guess when you're a certain age you're too tired to learn, I don't know.

C: I think it's hard, sort of, now I think you're right. And this is sort of the final question, but if you were to ask a question about the experiences of immigrants in Lowell, what would it be? Sort of like, did we miss a question?

M: Ask them? That's a good question, that's a good question. I think one thing I don't understand about immigrants is why they're not as politicized, why their children aren't politicized. Ok, I can understand it, but we have immigrants from a lot of different places in the world and this seems to be a common theme. I mean, you really, really have to work hard to politicize people and I don't know why that is. That's the question I would ask immigrants: Why is it?

C: Thank you so much. This is a great interview and I've really learned a lot and I enjoyed it. Thank you so much for participating.